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THE DECLINE IN ENGLISH LIBERALISM.

THE general election in England has come and gone without producing brighter results for the Liberal party. It is true that the election was sprung upon the country, but the results would not have been essentially different, had this not been the case. Scores of seats were uncontested by the Liberals, indicating an apathy and a helpless feeling almost unknown before. During a period of fifteen years three general elections with overwhelming majorities have gone to the so-called Unionist party, but only one with a tiny majority to the Liberal party. How is such a phenomenon to be explained?

Within the inside circles of Liberalism one hears much of personal issues, but no sweeping results are to be explained thus. I do not suggest that these personal quarrels have nothing to do with the demoralized condition of the party, but they have merely accentuated a state of chaos already existing. We must go deep in searching for causes of political disaster, and we must try to eliminate personalities, as far as can well be, and look to large and far-reaching influences. I venture to submit an explanation of the Liberal collapse which, though at first sight it may seem paradoxical, will be found to meet the requirements of a sound hypothesis by explaining the facts.

The Liberal party, then, has gone under because of its remarkable success. It has, in the main, carried out the program which it set itself to carry out. Moreover, so complete has been its achievement that its opponents have aided it to do its task and have appropriated most of its work. The willingness of the English Conservative party to adopt what has become inevitable and to bow before the accomplished fact stands out in a conspicuous manner, as compared with the methods of French conservatism, which, after making ineffectual protests, retires to its rural châteaux and to the Faubourg St. Germain and keeps up a semi-treasonable agitation against

the government and the new laws demanded by public opinion. The English Conservative, on the contrary, accepts the new conditions and pretends that he was always in favor of them. In this fact will be found, I venture to think, the chief cause of the decline of the English Liberal party.

This process, first definitely conceived and systematically carried out by Disraeli, was begun by Wellington and Peel in the year 1828, in connection with Catholic Emancipation. The Whigs had been honorably and consistently identified with the Catholic cause. So, too, had Pitt, who was dismissed by George III because he was faithful to the promise he had given at the destruction of the Irish Parliament, that the Act of Union should involve the full liberation of the Catholic population. But the later Tories, who commended themselves to the king and the regent, were the representatives of an insane bigotry, and under their rule the Catholic cause stood no chance. It was only when O'Connell had become the uncrowned king of Ireland and resistance to reform was dangerous in the extreme that Wellington and Peel surrendered. They simply thought they were acting as peacemakers, and so they were. But they were also beginning that process of undermining Liberalism by appropriating its principles which has continued to our own day.

Two years after came the great movement for Parliamentary reform. It seemed at first as if a purely adverse and reactionary attitude would be taken up by the Tory party. Wellington, Inglis, Croker, Twiss resembled, each in his way, French reactionaries, rather than the complacent Conservatives with whom we have become acquainted in later times. But, as usual in England, a convenient compromise was arranged to which the king was a party, and, as soon as the reformed Parliament met, the Tory party was as ready for the conversion of the new voters to the Tory creed as if no such thing as reform had ever been heard of. Here was act two in the political drama. First, religious liberty had been admitted, now Parliamentary reform was accepted by Toryism. Dr. Johnson spoke with scorn of the "bottomless Whigs" of his day. What would he

have said of the degenerate condition of the fine old crusted Toryism, of which he was the greatest champion of his time? Yet, had not Toryism given way, it would have been a dead creed.

Within nine years of the passing of the Reform Act, Toryism had become so strong that it swept the country, and the Peel ministry of 1841 came in with a huge majority. Devoted by ties of both sentiment and interest to the landlords of England, the Peel ministry represented the high protectionist element, as opposed to the new free-trade doctrines which Cobden, with a persuasive logic never surpassed in England, was pressing on the mind of the country. A superficial observer would have imagined that Peel and his cohorts were so much in the ascendant that the Corn Laws would stand. But, as soon as economic pressure in the form of the Irish famine acted on the Tory party, Peel instantly threw up the sponge, decreed the death of protectionism and accepted the whole body of free-trade economic doctrine. It is true that, for a time, he split up the Tory party, but the protectionist wing made no headway and died out in a few years.

Here, again, another great Liberal reform was actually carried by the Tory party, and that a reform far more deadly to Tory interests of the most obvious character than either parliamentary reform or religious status. It is true that the official Whigs under Melbourne and Russell were hardly less friendly to free trade than was the Tory party. The free-trade movement was made up of a *nouvelle couche sociale*, differentiated alike from Whig and Tory. All the more remarkable its triumph; all the more significant the abdication of the Tory party, and its acceptance of this economic principle of advanced Liberalism. It was the most striking political English capitulation of the century, as far-sighted Tories saw.

In the year 1853 Mr. Gladstone, as chancellor of the exchequer in the Peelite ministry of Lord Aberdeen, produced and carried a budget of an almost revolutionary character. The collapse of protection had rendered new financial methods necessary, and that budget was Mr. Gladstone's most signal

achievement. It contained provisions disagreeable to the Tory party and was much criticised. But it became law, and the finance so established was never contested until the new high imperialism necessitated new and very doubtful methods, under whose depressing influence English consols have declined in value some sixteen points in about two years. The alarms and excursions which are connected with the name of Palmerston belong to this period, and he so hypnotized the Liberal party that it became like its opponents. So, in the era from 1855 to 1865 we find a surrender of the Liberal party to the Tories and an acceptance of Tory methods and principles, rather than the surrender of Toryism to the inevitable Liberal advance.

As soon, however, as Palmerston passed away, the Liberals girt themselves for a new struggle on the old battle-ground of parliamentary reform. Again the old phenomenon appeared. The Russell-Gladstone bill for a slight extension of the suffrage having been defeated by a small majority, Disraeli instantly seized the opportunity to "steal the clothes of the Whigs while they were bathing." He first introduced a "fancy franchise" bill; but when it was thrown out, he at once brought forward a much more comprehensive measure than that of Mr. Gladstone, conferring a vote on every householder in the land. Again Toryism took the sails out of the hands of Liberalism; again a great Liberal reform was appropriated by the party which had but a short while before been hostile to all reform. The present Lord Salisbury declared that it was a violation of principle; and so it was. But it helped to stave off revolution; it kept the party system going, while making it more of a sham; and it converted Lord Salisbury himself to the opinion that it was useless any longer to attempt to "stem the torrent of democracy."

The Tory party could do nothing against the great reforms initiated by the first and best ministry of Mr. Gladstone, that of 1868-1873. Spite of a vigorous agitation in behalf of the State Church of Ireland, its disestablishment was carried, Queen Victoria, it is said, mediating between the two parties

for generous terms for the clergy. The ballot, the new system of public primary education, the new army system and other reforms were made good. But the point is that, save as regards the educational system, the Tories accepted all these reforms, and so Toryism and Liberalism became less and less divided. "We have secured all that we want," said in effect thousands of the well-to-do class which in former days had been Liberal; "now it is time to rest and be quiet. We shall either cease to take a prominent part in Liberalism, or we shall go over to the new Conservatism, which has ceased to be persecuting and stupid and has become moderate and the friend of property, respectability and the older Liberal attitude."

This tendency of moderate people was confirmed by the newer development of the labor movement. I am somewhat anticipating, but even in the earlier seventies there were not wanting signs of the new spirit in the English labor movement. The trade unions were completely emancipated, and the strikes, the energetic speeches of labor men and the claims put forward were all abhorrent to the *bourgeois* who had been a Liberal, but who now saw his modest fortune threatened by men of a lower social stratum. The International was then a formidable power, or at least was supposed to be, and it had begun its career in London and under the auspices of Englishmen. The distrust and suspicion excited by the trend of affairs in the labor world helped to swell the Tory majority of 1874, the year in which the stampede from Liberalism first became manifest.

But another surrender of Toryism was destined to occur. During the Disraeli premiership the chief subject agitated before Mr. Gladstone began his Bulgarian campaign was the extension of the suffrage to the rural laborers, who had been left out of the measure of 1867. Even a few of the Liberals did not like this project, which was opposed by the present Duke of Devonshire, then nominally leader of the Liberal party. As for the Tory party, it was against the project. But the year 1884 came and the measure was carried with the aid of the Tory party, the redistribution of seats involved being

settled by an arrangement between leading representatives of both parties. Thus again had Toryism capitulated. Thus again had Liberalism been deprived of a rallying cry, and therefore of one more reason for existence. The differences between the two parties had now been reduced to so narrow a line of demarcation that it was hard to tell in what Liberalism and Toryism respectively consisted. Under such conditions the elections of 1885 were fought. The Liberal party was divided, and hence weakened ; the Tories had no proposals ; and it was not wonderful, therefore, under such circumstances, — with a new electorate, with a Gladstone wing and a Chamberlain wing, with the Liberals discredited in their foreign policy and the Irish in deadly hostility, — that the election should show no clear result.

Thus the close of 1885 found the old Liberal program and the old Liberal party largely exhausted. This condition of things (proved by the meagre Liberal items of reform set before the country by the Liberal leader) led to two results. First, a considerable section of the Liberal party began to think of leaving it. Secondly, Mr. Gladstone, when he discovered that the elections yielded no issue, commenced to turn his attention to a new issue which he was soon in a position to force on the party — the issue of Irish Home Rule. As soon as he opened up the question and showed that he had been converted to the Home Rule cause, the wavering Whigs grasped at the excuse for leaving a party with which they had little sympathy, and in whose future they did not believe. Thus the split of 1886 was inevitable, growing out of the political conditions which obtained in England — namely, the exhaustion of the Liberal party and the consequent ending for a time of real party divergencies, as they had existed when the words “Tory” and “Whig” or “Liberal” represented a living reality.

In other countries, it may be pointed out, a similar state of things obtained. But in these countries parliamentary groups of a more or less definite character arose. In England the Liberal party would not admit its true condition ; nay, it does

not yet admit it. It pretends to be a united party holding a common creed. So long as Mr. Gladstone was leader of the party, differences were concealed behind his colossal form. But as soon as he retired, these differences at once broke out, and now they stand so obvious before the people that it is no wonder the electorate does not dream of placing the Liberal party in office. Apart from personal quarrels, — with which, as I have said, we have nothing to do here, — these differences concern foreign and colonial politics, and what is generally called the question of militant imperialism. The accession of Lord Rosebery to office in 1894 brought these questions at once to a head.

It is not my purpose to review the history of the unfortunate Rosebery ministry or the conduct of Lord Rosebery since, still less the story of the Salisbury ministry, with its wars and rumors of wars. I wish now to point out the singular remedy offered to the Liberals, in order to restore them to health and strength. Just as Liberalism permeated the Tory party, and as the Tories accepted all the chief results of Liberal reform and seemed to thrive upon this strange diet, so now it is suggested that, were the Liberal party to take to the Tory diet, it might recover its energies and be once more robust and full of life. In other words, the Liberal party is recommended to take a deep draught of imperialism and so beat the Tories on their own ground, just as the Tories have taken up reform and beaten the Liberals on their own ground. It is assumed that imperialism is inevitable, that it is a final product, if not of human wisdom, at least of practical necessity. There is really no theory of imperialism in England, as there is in Russia or Germany. It is all hand-to-mouth, designed for the moment, altered from time to time to suit convenience. Based as it is on two facts, — trade necessity, or supposed necessity, and the racial feeling which leads such a colony as New Zealand to join in the South African war, — imperialism in England perhaps has no need of that intellectual defense which one finds for *Weltpolitik* in Germany. Such as it is, it is the dominant factor in English politics

to-day, and there would seem to be on superficial grounds something to be said for the notion that, were the Liberal party to take up imperialism actively and aggressively, it might in a few years supersede the Tory party by gaining once more English confidence. Yet I am persuaded that there is no greater delusion.

There is, in the first place, a vital difference between Toryism and Liberalism. The latter must advance; the former has only to defend and accept whatever is inevitable. While it has been necessary and politic for the Tory party to accept all the various reforms to which I have referred, it does not follow that it would be well for the Liberals to reciprocate this action. The Liberal rôle is essentially different. For the Liberal party to take up the defense of certain interests because they are powerful or for the moment popular, would be for the Liberal party to abdicate its function of attack and initiative. It is for this reason that the party must, at the risk of losing many votes, attack the huge vested drink interest and initiate reforms in education and local government. As well might a man cease to walk and think he could retain the use of his limbs as the Liberals abstain from their function of attack and initiative and hope to maintain political vitality. The party must be aggressive or cease to exist. The Tories need not do this; they are only expected to defend the *status quo* and to accept what has been positively accomplished.

There is, therefore, no *prima facie* case for supposing that, because the Tory party has attached itself firmly to the cause of high imperialism, it would do the Liberal party any good to attach itself also to that cause for the purpose of making political capital. The business of the Liberal party is not to follow the Tory, though it is the business of the Tory party to follow the Liberal. Besides, as Mr. John Morley said in a very powerful speech at Oxford, if the electorate desires imperialism, it will infallibly go to the Tories for it, and no specious special pleading on the part of the Liberals will be able to turn votes on that issue. Consequently, from the electoral point of view, the adoption of a strong imperialism

would be a most mistaken policy for the Liberal party. Recent history confirms this theory. Mr. Gladstone was led in 1882 into a policy of imperialism in Egypt from which he shrank. Whether he was right or wrong in his policy of intervention, I do not say. What is certain is that that policy shattered his ministry and his party. The imperialistic policy of Lord Rosebery during his short term of the premiership left him with a party weaker than any English party has been during the present century.

Now this can be no mere accident. If the adoption of the Tory policy of imperialism is disastrous for Liberals, there is some reason for the fact. By imperialism, it will be understood, I do not mean the discharge of absolutely needful duties in regions *de facto* under British sway and for which the British authorities are responsible. I assume that no party at present would argue for neglect of obvious duty, however many Liberals, like Grafton in the eighteenth century and Bright in the nineteenth, deeply regretted the annexation of India. What I mean by imperialism is, first, the repeated annexation of territories during the last few years, mainly in Africa, and, second, the justification of such annexations on commercial, political and moral or quasi-moral grounds. It is not to be wondered at that such a policy should have approved itself to the Tory party. For, in the first place, it provides numerous posts, both civil and military, for the people connected with the party. Secondly, it assures activity in the speculative markets, — one might say the gambling markets, — such as the “Kaffir Circus.” Thirdly, it ensures the perpetuation of Tory doctrines at home, through the military men and civilians who hold the offices in the dependencies. For these, on retirement from active service, come to England and take part in politics, local and national, and their training in arbitrary and practically irresponsible rule fits them for active work on the side of class interests and Toryism.

Imperialism, therefore, is a paying business for the Tory. But for the Liberal who believes in the ground principles of Liberalism, it is deadly. Every extension of the Empire

means more class feeling at home, more of the Anglo-Indian feeling, less of the old humane ideas of Fox, Mill and Cobden. I am not bringing, it will be understood, any sweeping charges against the imperial official or military class; I am merely contending for the indubitable fact that the extension of that class is fatal to what we have known as Liberalism. If this is so, then it follows that it cannot pay the Liberal party to vie with its opponents in the cult of imperialism. Liberalism, by so doing, would defeat its own ends. The end of Toryism is only the preservation of the *status quo*, however that may have been reached. But the end of Liberalism is a certain ideal of public life, which is incompatible with the sway of the official or soldier whose life has been spent in ruling other people against their will, or at least without consulting that will. When Liberalism admits, as a political theory, that people are to be ruled forever on such a basis, it has practically ceased to exist, and can only be what Disraeli said the old Tory party was, an organized hypocrisy. So it becomes clear that Liberalism cannot rejuvenate itself by borrowing from the imperialism of its opponents.

In the next place, even the strongest imperialist will admit that his ideal may conceivably be carried too far. To every one but a mere fanatic the Greek idea of poise or balance in the state must always present itself as attractive and necessary. The most thorough-going Radical will, in his calm moments, admit the need of a Conservative opposition, as will the Conservative the need of a Radical opposition. The candid Socialist will be glad of a dash of Anarchism in his otherwise too rigid commonwealth. The imperialist, whose policy has brought about an immense increase of naval and military expenditure in England and a not very enviable state of things in South Africa, may well argue for the show at least of a different theory and practice, and may therefore contend with perfect sincerity for an anti-imperialist party, as being his true critics and opponents. If the other party is to take exactly the same line as your own, where will you get that criticism which every sane man must see is essential for the life of a

free state? If both Liberal and Tory parties in England were to become imperialist in precisely the same degree, if the main ideas of the so-called Liberal imperialists were to be adopted by the Liberal party as a whole, no greater condition of danger for the country could be imagined. So far as foreign policy is concerned, serious criticism and opposition to possibly disastrous courses would cease to exist.

The English constitution consists in essence of party government, and it will undergo a revolution when party government is no more. It may not be a good system; from the point of view of logic and the reason it is not. But such as it is, it is there. Those who counsel the Liberal party to take up imperialism as the Tory party has taken it up, no matter what may be their intentions, are undermining the constitution. Nothing is more absurd than to say that you can all be of one mind in foreign relations and yet divide into parties in regard to domestic affairs. What are domestic affairs? Is finance? Surely. Yet finance is far more affected by foreign policy than by any home matters. English taxation is going steadily up; English reserve capital is going steadily down. How can it be pretended that this has nothing to do with imperialism, when every one knows that it is imperialism which has brought this about? How can the imperialist who approves the diplomatic and war policy quarrel with the financial result? *Inter arma silent leges*. How can the imperialist who knows that you cannot attend to more than one thing at a time complain at the entire neglect of the reforms at home which he professed to desire? He has chosen his lot, and he must be content. A Liberal, of all men, wishes to see the necessities of life cheap for the masses. But the first outcome of imperialism, with its wars for empire, is to raise the price of the leading commodities of life; and with what reason shall he who supported this policy grumble at the inevitable consequences?

There is no real distinction between foreign and home questions, as imperialists pretend. They are all of a piece. Aristotle, who favored a vigorous domestic policy of state

regulation, in order to produce an economic poise or balance in the commonwealth, also warned the ruler against aggressive foreign policy. He was right. You cannot separate the two. England can have the old policy of half a century ago, the policy of Cobden, of which peace was but a part, being connected with retrenchment and reform; she can have the policy of Mr. Chamberlain, with its "pegging out claims for posterity"; but she cannot have both at the same time. It is well, therefore, that England should have the two parties which represent these different ideals; but it is assuredly not well that one party should try to amalgamate with the other in foreign politics, while pretending to fight it in home affairs. Nay, it is impossible. Were the Liberal party to become imperialist in the full sense of the term, it would perish and another party would rise to take its place — and this would happen in the very nature of things. As Mr. Morley said at Oxford, the Socialists would step in to take the place of the real Liberal opposition, as has been the case both in Germany and in Belgium.

What is needed in party government is a real issue running through from top to bottom in public life — an issue which cannot be ignored or evaded; and it is exactly for lack of such an issue that the Liberal party in England is so crippled, so faint, so resourceless at this hour. It has for years ceased to live by principle. In Mr. Gladstone's later years it lived on a personality. Since he passed away it has not had even that to fall back on. Bankrupt of ideas; looking now this way, now that, for some means of help; afraid to utter anything which will be likely to rouse the ire of that master of the situation, "the average man;" with no intellectual basis, with no belief in its own fundamental creed, the Liberal party is but a sorry spectacle to-day. But there is one chance for it, and that chance lies in a course precisely opposite to that criticised here. Let the party take up a clear line of thought and action against the dominant imperialism of the hour, and it will revive. Many who will not quite agree with it will nevertheless welcome such an attitude, as giving a check to a tendency which is certainly

full of risks and which may become highly dangerous. The Liberal domestic program is at present a mere tissue of words, and must remain so till the fever of imperialism has run its course. Therefore the Liberal party can do nothing in that sphere. But it can hold up to the nation some other political ideal than that which is now dominant; and if the arguments presented here are valid, it is not only its duty but also its interest to do so.

WILLIAM CLARKE.

LONDON, ENGLAND.

NOTE. — After the above article was accepted, but before it was put in type, we learned with profound sorrow of the death of Mr. Clarke, which occurred at Mostar, Herzegovina, May 10. That he would have found anything in the political conditions since he wrote to modify the views of the article, is doubtful. It has been deemed best to print it as he wrote it. — Eds.